Managing Heritage Organisations: The Heritage of Malaysia Trust

Associate Professor Laurence Loh
Deputy-President
Badan Warisan Malaysia
2 Jalan Stonor
50450 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
laurence@lla.com.my
www.badanwarisan.org.my

Introduction

Organisations are defined and shaped by the objectives that spurred their creation. In the case of Badan Warisan Malaysia (BWM) or the Heritage of Malaysia Trust, formed in 1983 by a group of concerned professionals in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, its principal objective is

“To promote the permanent preservation for the benefit and education of the people of Malaysia of all buildings which because of their historical associations or architectural features or for other reasons are considered by the Council of the Badan to form part of the Heritage of Malaysia.”

So for the next ten years, it directed its efforts towards articulating its mission to preserve Malaysia’s built heritage. It embarked on saving several vernacular buildings by first creating public awareness of their endangered state and then raising the funds to physically conserve them, using the services and energy of its own members to do so.

This set the modus operandi for the organization and as time passed the project-based mentality has become so deeply entrenched in its collective psyche that up till today it still shapes the choices and decisions it makes.

The original decisions to form a registered “company limited by guarantee” without shares under the Malaysian Companies Act 1965 and to obtain charitable status have also had a significant bearing on how it has conducted itself over the years. The rules and ethics attached to being such a company and having a Board of Directors at the helm has nurtured and inculcated within its management system a sense of collective decision-making that is always consistent, strategic, nation-based and forward-looking, founded on selflessness, self-reliance and unyielding dedication to a cause.
But like any living organism, if an organization does not adapt to the times and the ever-changing environment and socio-political climate, it will become obsolete. BWM has managed to transform its role in society progressively. From seeing its mission as being solely a guardian of Malaysia’s built and tangible heritage, it has incrementally enlarged its own mandate to be involved in cultural-mapping programmes, protecting intangible heritage, engaging with stakeholders in community-based cultural issues and undertaking heritage site management and planning.

To cement the tradition of centering its activities around real-time projects and to answer the changing needs of the market-place, BWM set up a consultancy arm called Badan Warisan Heritage Services Sdn. Bhd. to undertake a wide range of commissioned projects, both as a structured way to building and share capacity in heritage-related sub-fields as well as to generate a regular source of income to sustain the operations the Trust.

Nurturing a compelling corporate culture

**Essence**

To explain and elaborate on the opening observations, it would be a more useful proposition to focus on defining the **essence** of the organization that drives its management philosophy, rather than on the **mechanics** of managing it.

I was initially struck by something the editor of the Penang Economic Monthly wrote in his August 2011 Editorial which starts by saying:-

“*Most of us are prepared to accept the notion that Science is objective. The application of Science, however, is another story. Technology is driven not only by the matrix of demand and supply, it also springs from cultural biases.*

*Once a technology has rooted itself, society cannot help but be formed by it. Man may have constructed Machine, but once it's there, it is Machine that makes Man.*”

This idea provides a basis for my analysis and observations of the collective psyche that drives BWM.

There are five keywords/phrases that underwrite BWM’s vision, directions and successes:-

1. Heritage of Malaysia
2. Preservation of buildings
3. Project-based mentality
4. Company limited by guarantee without shares
5. Charitable status
Heritage of Malaysia

By laying emphasis on the heritage of Malaysia, BWM had set itself the onerous task of being the non-government heritage advocate for the whole country, unlike, say, the Penang Heritage Trust, which focused its efforts on the State of Penang only. For it to comment otherwise would be outside its term of reference, but not so for BWM. The public perception inevitably grew to view BWM as a national organization and expectations far outpaced its actual size and capability. Nonetheless, the dice was cast and its self-imposed social responsibility had to be accepted.

Thus, whenever a heritage issue arose anywhere in the country, BWM had to be the NGO that rattled its saber, be the body that went to the press and stand up to be counted. It was even expected to raise the funds for properties that needed saving.

Preservation of buildings

At the outset, BWM’s stated core mission was to protect and save Malaysia’s Built Heritage for present and future generations. At that point in time, conservation of Malaysia’s diverse heritage was a marginal matter in the eyes of both the Government and the general public. It was an “elitist” subject and conservation was a luxury and an activity undertaken by supposedly rich individuals of leisure. This was a stigma that BWM had to work hard to slowly overcome.

It carried out many conservation projects, many of which were concentrated around Malay vernacular timber houses. This was mainly to create Best Practice exemplars to articulate its vision and commitment and to showcase the beauty and preciousness of its historic buildings. There was so much to do and little resources to do it with.

Nonetheless, it plodded along whilst real estate development, especially in urban areas, accelerated by economic growth imperatives, grew in scale and width by leaps and bounds. What little BWM managed to save, on its home ground, i.e. in Kuala Lumpur, it was fighting a losing battle. Comparatively, most of Kuala Lumpur’s built heritage has been razed to the ground. And generally, it has to do more with lip service than real commitment when it comes to seeking help, support and financing from the relevant authorities to save the country’s heritage.

It is a well-known fact that NGO-driven missions and programmes cannot keep pace with national economic agendas focused on annual growth figures and earnings, especially when cultural heritage is not recognized in its own right and acknowledged as a vital nation-building asset, to be conserved for its capital value. At one time it was even seen as only a subset of tourism.

Nonetheless, BWM has persevered in its efforts to advocate for heritage protection and in the early years it never deviated from its focus on buildings. This has set the tone and the mood within the organisation at both Board of Directors’ as well as members’ levels, one that nurtured an unconscious project-based mentality.
Project-based mentality
One could say that this is self-explanatory for in a manner of speaking it is. Because the mission was to save built heritage, it required hands-on, real-time efforts to adopt and conserve physical structures in full view of the public. This encapsulates its project-based status, grounded more in practice and less in theory.

The successful completion and delivery of each physical project also added to BWM’s visibility in the days before the advent of the internet. This automatically encouraged continued involvement in the process under discussion and the application of a true and tried public outreach approach and methodology, which in the midterm of its life to date has been applied to include projects focused on intangible heritage.

Whatever the nature of the subject is, BWM will engage with it through a project-based programme. There are many completed exercises that encourage this conclusion.

Sooner or later, the formalisation of the project-based approach had to happen. It took place in 2005 when BWM formed a subsidiary company called Badan Warisan Heritage Services Sdn. Bhd. to undertake heritage consultancy work. This allowed BWM to accept commissions on a commercial basis in order to meet the demands of the market that was casting around for organizations to produce heritage-related studies and undertake conservation projects. This was also a deliberate move to capitalize on its in-house expertise, to expose its members to collective professional work and to build capacity to operate on a multi-disciplinary platform in a structured fashion.

The objective was also to ensure that there was a steady source of income outside of subscriptions and donations. Presently, the consultancy work contributes to about 30% of the gross income.

Company limited by guarantee without shares
What this means is that the company that is formed does not issue any shares. Nobody owns the company and “limited by guarantee” means that the company is formed on the principle of having the liability of its members limited by the memorandum to such amount as the members may respectively undertake to contribute to the assets of the company in the event of its being wound up.

Management control and the ultimate success or failure to perform and fulfill the stated objects in its Articles of association lie solely with the Board of Directors who have no material interest in the company it serves. There can therefore be no material gain on a large scale for the directors. They work solely for the love of heritage.

Thus, when directors are selected and elected, great care is taken to ensure that they demonstrate a sense of volunteerism, that their status is commensurate with legal and moral expectations enshrined in the Companies Act, that their
interest in cultural heritage conservation is irrefutable and preferably that their professionalism and possession of skill sets can be put to good use to contribute both to the growth and management of the organization as well as to enhance its public image of integrity, respectability and dedication.

In the early days, the separation of executive responsibilities from supporting social activities saw the parallel creation of Sahabat Warisan Malaysia or Friends of the Heritage Trust, who often were the overt voice of activism and public awareness building. The company had placed itself in a liaison role with government, acting as the go-in-between, so to speak. Many of the original founders were ex-government officers of high ranking or leaders in professional bodies and they felt that that was where their strength lay.

However, as the political and heritage climate changed so did BWM. Sahabat Warisan Malaysia was absorbed into the BWM structure and the membership base enlarged. It started to raise its profile in the public space, vocalizing its mission more overtly and articulating its stance on negative impacts on the heritage front.

Charitable status
There are strict laws and guidelines that govern how a charitable organization behaves in respect of both soliciting for donations as well as how funds are dispensed. There cannot be a profit motive attached to its actions and that its accounting practices should not attract taxation.

This obligation has unconsciously nurtured a sense of selflessness and moral subservience that is centered on public welfare and service in the people that have served the organization over long periods of time.

Sum Total
The end result, when you merge all the influences described above, is a corporate culture that is unique in Malaysia. The very tagline that it promotes, viz. “for present and future generations”, made visible through the projects it has delivered over the last 30 years, has helped it gain respect from both the private and public sectors.

Due to the fact that BWM has also worked very closely with government agencies over the years, often choosing cooperation and consensus building over confrontation, a strategic advantage has been created, with BWM having an inside track to people of influence in government. The good relationship has allowed BWM to affect and create policies by proxy and, on one specific occasion, to actually create a Heritage Bill through face-to-face, over-the-table sessions with high-level administrators in planning and parliamentary draftspersons.

Given these factors, BWM is sometimes mistakenly identified as a government agency (which it is not) or a government power broker (which it is also not).
Staying relevant

The greatest challenge has been to stay ahead of the game, seeing that it is one BWM started in the first place. It had set out to be the leading heritage advocacy organization in the country. It became that. But today the goalposts have been moved. Where once it took center stage by default because heritage was a marginal subject, heritage is now a mainstream matter purely because a Ministry of Culture has been created by decree and a National Heritage Act (the Law) has been promulgated.

Today we have in attendance Malaysia’s Commissioner of Heritage, a post created as a result of the abovementioned Law. This is a manifestation of the manner in which the heritage landscape has been transformed. The “business” of heritage, viz. legal protection, identification and listing, public buy-in, promotion, etc. now becomes the purview and obligations of a government entity. Where once BWM has to fly the standard, stake out the higher ground and rake the coals to keep the passion for what belongs to future generations burning and alive, today the relevant Ministry has rightfully taken ownership of all that the Law encompasses.

However, this does not mean that the role of heritage advocacy and activism is dead. It means that the role has to be reinvented. As in many a context, the governmental approach often differs from those of other private sector stakeholders. Sometimes, there is “I know better” mindset that comes into play when one represents the government and has the weight of the law as back-up. Public consultation is not practiced extensively and there continues to be a lack of symmetry between the government’s approach, policies and decisions and that of Heritage NGOs.

In a paper I presented at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles on Consensus Building in 2009, I wrote:-

“Many Asian countries have both planning laws and heritage conservation laws wherein public consultation is prescribed. But they remain singular statements with no explicit procedures laid out as to the nature of frameworks and methodologies that are to be applied…..

(In Malaysia) the concept of public consultation is still not well understood and application of the law is merely perfunctory. It begs the question of whether building a high degree of consensus through public participation is seen as a national goal or a ‘modus operandi’ for nation building and the embedding of sustainable policies and plans.”

As conditions change, BWM continues to identify the gaps that still exist or have been created by the migration and legalization of obligations and responsibilities to the Heritage Ministry. Now, it has to act as a watchdog, a role it does not relish or favour. On the positive side, it can devote all its energies and limited resources to thought creation, innovation and problem-solving on the ground, to be involved in live projects where its real strengths and passion lie.
BWM has not taken its eyes off the built heritage, but invariably, because the expediencies have changed, it has increasingly focused on intangible heritage as well as widening its coverage of heritage-related subjects to include heritage management plans, cultural-mapping, site management, heritage impact assessments, new heritage and "smart heritage futures". The last description is a term coined by Associate Professor Harold Twaites, the Dean of the Faculty of Creative Multimedia of Multimedia University who suggests that all forms of heritage, operating on a digital-friendly platform, will soon leverage on the production of smart, interactive and immersive content to preserve and transmit their cultural significance, collective memories and individual identities.

**Conclusion**

The presentation has concentrated on defining the essence or collective psyche of BWM as opposed to elaborating on the mechanics of how it is managed per se. Anyone familiar with running a company and the laws and regulations associated with it can picture how one would operate on a daily basis. BWM is no different. Put another way, it's about how it manages and clusters its human and intellectual resources to make a difference.

What makes it different and unique is its corporate culture that was moulded by the socio-political forces at the time of its formation and the leadership characteristics and qualities of its governing body and members, moderated by a heritage agenda that constantly needed definition and shaping.

Clarity was created through learning on the job where precedents had to be set in the absence of local knowledge, intellectual material, professional resources and being on the fringe when political scenarios and agendas did not encourage heritage conservation. In the absence of heritage laws in the formative years, I put it that due to the haphazard nature of politics, progress and projects had to be produced in advance of understanding and conservation consciousness. The correctness of the projects that were selected was secondary to the process of self-development.

Today the self-confidence that BWM exudes is a manifestation of a true and tried approach, where it continues to stay loyal to its core values.

---
